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STATE FOR SCA/FO (DAS GASTRIGHT), SCA/A
STATEPASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/CDHA/DG
NSC FOR HARRIMAN
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CENTCOM FOR CG CFC-A, CG CJTF-76, POLAD

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL MARR AF IC PGOV

SUBJECT: PRT CHAGHCHARAN: PLAN AFOOT TO WITHDRAW ICELANDIC
MOBILE LIAISON OBSERVATION TEAM FROM CHAGHCHARAN PRT?

¶1. (U) This cable contains and action request -- see para 7.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Reports are circulating at PRT Chaghcharan that the Icelandic government may be preparing to withdraw the Icelandic Mobile Patrol Team (Mobile Liaison Observation Team/MLOT) from Afghanistan at the end of April. Because of its makeup, special equipment, and experience driving in the kind of harsh terrain found in Ghor province, the Icelandic team has been especially effective in conducting patrols. Moreover, through its reliability, efforts to pass on skills to other patrol units, and unique rescue capability, the Icelanders have made the PRT as a whole much more effective. Because of the potentially serious consequences for PRT Chaghcharan, Post suggests Department intervene with Icelandic authorities to underscore the value we attach to the work of the Icelandic MLOT team and request its mission be extended. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (SBU) U.S. PolRep in Chaghcharan recently learned from the PRT's Icelandic development officer that her government may withdraw the Icelandic Mobile Liaison Observation Team (MLOT) at the end of April 2007, when the current MOU with the Lithuanian government runs out. When questioned about this, the head of the Icelandic MLOT confirmed the report. His team will rotate out in February, and its successor is scheduled to remain only two months, instead of the usual four. Speculation at PRT Chaghcharan is that the new Icelandic foreign minister may be looking to remove the issue of Iceland's &military8 mission in Afghanistan in advance of upcoming national elections and so may be considering replacing the MLOT with police trainers to give the mission a more civilian face or redefining the MLOT's mission as solely to support development activities.

¶4. (SBU) The prospect of Iceland withdrawing or redefining its MLOT raises serious concerns for us. The Lithuanian PRT commander shares our concerns and is anxious for the Icelandic team to continue in its present form. Certainly the Lithuanians, Croats, and Danes all conduct valuable patrols in their assigned districts, but the Icelandic team is unique in the resources and skills it brings to its designated patrols. The Icelanders, and only the Icelanders,

have truly all-weather vehicles (Nissan Patrols) capable of operating throughout mountainous and often snow-bound Ghor. They alone have the 388 (summer) and 448 (winter) tires that allow the vehicles to handle the province's extremely rough terrain (there are no paved roads anywhere in Ghor). The Icelanders are particularly adept at using their GPS and onboard laptops to chart their course, allowing them to travel without difficulty even at night. The makeup of their team, consisting of &civilian specialists,⁸ also gives them special advantages. The current team, for example, includes two counter-terrorism policemen, a search and rescue worker, skilled drivers, a paramedic, and a mechanic (who participates in the patrols). The result to date has been remarkable reliability for the team's missions, and particularly valuable and insightful reporting.

¶15. (SBU) Beyond the value they add through their patrols, however, the Icelanders contribute in unique ways to the PRT as a whole)- something that causes us to be especially concerned at the prospect of their departure. A major problem for all the other patrols is a lack of experience at driving under the harsh mountain conditions of Ghor. The Icelanders suggest the terrain in Ghor resembles in many respects the conditions they face at home. Unlike the other elements, the Icelandic team is used to off-road driving up steep inclines and fording rivers. Importantly, they make every effort to pass on to the other elements their special driving skills. (The Icelanders in Chaghcharan argue that turning over their vehicles to other PRT elements at the end of April, as some in Reykjavik appear to be suggesting, would result in a waste of the major investment Iceland has made in bringing the vehicles to Afghanistan because, without the corresponding special driving skills and ride-along mechanic, they predict the vehicles would soon become as vulnerable to

problems as the rest of the PRT's vehicle fleet.) Moreover, with winter just now settling in, the Icelanders have already had occasion to rescue other units, stranded vehicles, and as conditions worsen, they have been paired up increasingly with other units as a safeguard)- a bit to the frustration of the Icelanders themselves.

¶16. (SBU) Both the PRT,s Icelandic development officer and MLOT chief express frustration that the message of the MLOT's true mission does not appear to be getting back to the public at home (a major Icelandic newspaper reportedly declined to publish an account of the MLOT's work written by a former team chief). To characterize the Icelandic MLOT as a &military⁸ mission is largely a misnomer, they insist. The team's rules of engagement do not allow it to participate in combat except in self-defense, its members are not part of the PRT,s quick response force, and they do not perform guard duty. The Icelandic MLOT chief characterizes his unit's real mission as to give the people of its assigned districts a greater sense of security by its presence, to find out their needs, concerns, and ideas, and to feed these back into the reconstruction effort. He acknowledges that Iceland has the resources to contribute to the PRT's effort in Ghor in many ways, be it with its police trainers, health care workers, or engineers; but, he argues, the core mission of the PRT is performing patrols and his team does them uniquely well and makes an all but irreplaceable contribution to enabling the other elements to perform theirs effectively too. Whatever else Iceland might decide to contribute, he is distraught at the potential discarding of what he sees as a mission genuinely helpful to Afghanistan and its ultimate development. Both we and the PRT commander share his concern.

¶17. (SBU) Action Request: Given the particularly valuable contribution to PRT Chaghcharan provided by the Icelandic Mobile Liaison Observation Team and the serious downside) including added burden on others -- its withdrawal from patrol work would present, Post requests Department consider asking Embassy Reykjavik to contact appropriate Icelandic officials to underscore our appreciation for the special work being done by the Icelandic MLOT in Ghor and to request that Reykjavik seriously consider extending its mission.

NEUMANN